

Joliet prison purchase hinges on legislative action

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By Megann Horstead | For The Bugle

The Joliet City Council, in conjunction with the Joliet Area Historical Museum officials, are looking to put the City of Joliet on the map as a tourist destination by urging State lawmakers to introduce legislation, transferring ownership of the Joliet Correctional Center Prison to the two entities.

Joliet officials agreed May 2 to postpone the consideration of a measure urging the Illinois General Assembly to take legislative action to satisfy this aim. Councilman John Gerl was absent from the meeting.

“When I began in 2013, my challenge from my Board of Directors stated at my interview was find us some sustaining revenue,” said Greg Peerbolte, executive director of Joliet Area Historical Museum. “We don’t know that we can stay on city money forever, so we’re challenging you to find us ways where we can sustain our operations.”

Peerbolte recognizes the polarity discussion of repurposing the prison brings, and said it is in the museum’s interest to follow the concerns and feelings of the constituents to find a way to put the facility to new use.

Prison museums are touted as tourist attractions across the world for a number of destinations, including San Francisco, London and Dublin. Additionally, the subject of incarceration filtrates society through political discourse and popular culture.

Peerbolte referenced data he retrieved on revenue and the number of tourists drawn to penal museums for comparative purposes and said while he doesn’t think Joliet’s prison will draw crowds the way Alcatraz does, it still serves as reason to be open-minded.

“When you’re talking \$30 million of revenue, what would 10 percent of that do?” he asked. “What would 10 percent of 1.5 million annual visitors do? Ten percent of \$30 million could fund our operations for five years completely.”

Peerbolte said the most comparable tourist attraction to what Joliet can model itself after is Eastern State Penitentiary.

"I'm arguing we have all these ingredients, and we have them even better positioned than Eastern State Penitentiary, which no one's heard of outside of Philadelphia," he said.

The site of the Joliet prison closed 15 years ago, and it continues to deteriorate under the State's ownership. City officials do not have access to the building necessary to run site assessments.

It wasn't until recently that municipal police officers were granted the authority to arrest subjects for trespassing onto the property in question.

Mayor Bob O'Dekirk questioned what actions should be taken to get a better handle for the facility maintenance needs.

City Manager Jim Hock tried to explain.

"At another meeting, [Sen. Pat McGuire and Rep. Larry Walsh, Jr.], both of them will come here and tell you how hard they've tried to get the Department of Corrections and the State to allow us in there to do that kind of assessment, and they're not willing to do that," he said.

The facility, if approved for property transference and renovations, is to be used for public tours and other special uses. Parts of the prison would be deemed inaccessible to visitors to prevent concerns raised for environmental exposure. To note, the city's findings from an environmental engineering report show there exists no threat, based on the proposed use for the facility.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning provided the city with three potential renovation plans to consider, ranging in value from \$3.8 million to \$79 million and another scenario totaling to \$30 million. The proposed repairs at a minimum include improvements to bring in utilities, add landscaping and allow access to existing spaces within the prison, including some cell blocks, a kitchen and dining facility, the hospital and reception area.

Transfer of ownership could be sought to promote public safety and economic development. Sen. Pat McGuire (D-Crest Hill) and Rep. Larry Walsh, Jr. (D-Elwood) formed the Collins Street task force a number of years ago with these goals in mind.

The proposed plan for the prison stipulates that Joliet's Utilities Department purchase the parcel housing a tower, well and water building for \$100,000, with the funds retrieved being used for security purposes.

Hock said the city believes that "based on the current state of disrepair in the facility, we aren't proposing anything close to any of these plans."

Peerbolte agreed.

"It's a fairly turn-key operation," he said.

However, Councilman Larry Hug disagreed.

"One of the pressing issues for those that are in favor of considering taking it over is the longer it stays with the State and they don't put millions into it, the more it's going to deteriorate," he said. "Well, I've got some shocking news for you. Once we buy it for \$10 and once we put millions up front, it's going to continue to deteriorate. So, we don't know how bad it's gotten since the last time we were allowed... which was back in 2013."

Councilwoman Jan Quillman questioned how the State is able to retain rights to the prison without being held responsible for the deterioration.

"It's just that I don't understand why we can't hold them accountable for fixing up the building," she said. "We can't just let it sit there and deteriorate... That's the part I don't get."

City staff will look into what action they can take against the State for allowing the prison to deteriorate.

A number of Joliet officials expressed weariness at the thought of moving closer to taking ownership of the facility during last week's meeting.

O'Dekirk suggested to the council that they table the matter for further review at a later date.

To proceed with the project, the City of Joliet and the Joliet Area Historical Museum will need to form a Memorandum of Understanding and look into how they plan to address other measures to propel forward the facility and its new use.